

# Heracles transformed: Ovid and Sophocles

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Ovid's longest work, the *Metamorphoses*, though composed in dactylic hexameters and on an epic scale, is not really a true epic like Virgil's *Aeneid*. Rather it is a vast collection of stories sharing the common feature of metamorphosis, change of shape. These stories, drawn from Greek and Roman mythology, are entertaining enough in themselves; but part of their interest for the poet's more educated readers or hearers would be the way in which he followed or diverged from earlier poets' treatment, in Greek or Latin, of the same material. One of the sources from which Ovid drew was Greek tragedy, which he seems to have loved; and I want to focus on his debt to Sophocles in his treatment of one character: Heracles.

Ovid devotes the first 272 lines of *Met.* 9 to the great hero of the twelve labours, and the passage is clearly based to a large degree on Sophocles' powerful tragedy *The Women of Trachis*. This drama concerns the death of Heracles (as he is called in Greek) at the hands of his wife, Deianira, who is confronted by the prospect of sharing her husband with a concubine, the captive princess Iole. She therefore sends him a robe anointed with what she has been cheated by the centaur Nessus into believing will serve as a love-charm to win her husband back. It turns out to be a deadly poison. When Deianira discovers what she has unwittingly done, she commits suicide. Then, in a long closing scene, the dying Heracles is brought on stage in terrible agony, and the play ends with the hero instructing his son Hyllus to prepare his funeral pyre on Mount Oeta, where Heracles was historically worshipped by the Greeks as a god.

## A treacherous ferryman

Ovid's account follows Sophocles in the main order of events and in many of the narrative details. The background to the crucial events of *The Women of Trachis* lies in an ancient encounter between Heracles, the centaur Nessus, and Deianira. Nessus made an indecent pass at the newly-wedded Deianira when ferrying her across the river Evenus; Heracles, hearing her cries, shot and killed Nessus with an arrow tipped with poisonous blood from the hydra, and it was this blood on his tunic that the dying centaur told Deianira to use as a love charm if she ever feared a rival in her husband's affections. Ovid's account of the incident at the ford follows, in much of the detail, the graphic narrative which Sophocles puts into Deianira's mouth. However, the two accounts differ in one important detail. Sophocles makes Deianira say:

*I was riding on Nessus' shoulders, but when we'd  
reached  
mid-stream, he started to fondle my body. I screamed  
for help, and at once Zeus' son turned round and shot  
an arrow...*

Sophocles does not bother to tell us how Heracles got across the river, but Ovid uses the point to illustrate his Hercules' macho vanity. After the hero has entrusted his bride to the centaur, we are told:

*At once, then, just as he was, weighed down by his  
quiver and lion skin*

*(he'd tossed his club and his bow across to the other  
bank),  
he plunged in, crying 'I've beaten one river, and this is  
the second!'  
Too proud to depend on the waters obligingly taking  
him over,  
he didn't wait to explore where the current was most in  
his favour.  
Soon he had swum to the bank, and was lifting his bow  
off the ground  
when he heard a scream...*

By making Hercules swim across the river where the current is against him, Ovid has allowed him to facilitate Nessus' dirty work.

## Death in agony

Later on in Sophocles' play, Deianira hears her son Hyllus describe the horrible effects of the poisoned robe when Heracles has donned it for a magnificent sacrifice:

*The sweat broke out on his skin, and the tunic clung  
to his sides, as tightly as if a craftsman had glued it  
to all his joints. A convulsive pain came over  
his limbs and gnawed right into his bones. A deadly,  
malignant viper's poison was eating him up.*

Ovid's imagery is less economical:

*Even his blood gave a hiss, like the sound of a plate of  
hot metal  
plunged into icy water, and boiled in the fire of the  
poison.  
The greedy flames relentlessly sucked deep into his  
vitals.  
Black droplets of sweat exuded and trickled all over his  
body.  
The charring tendons crackled and snapped. The  
invisible canker  
melted the marrow inside his bones.*

## Boozy Hercules

Next, when Hercules indignantly catalogues his labours to point the contrast between his glorious exploits and inglorious demise, Ovid expands Sophocles' more selective and dignified list and ends the hero's long tirade with the cry, 'Can anyone still believe that the gods exist?' – although he is shortly to be deified himself! When he finally ascends the funeral pyre, he uses his awesome lionskin and club as a blanket and pillow and lies down

*smiling as if he were gently reclining, a guest at a  
banquet,  
crowned with a garland and quaffing the unmingled juice  
of the vineyard.*

This reminds one more of the boozy Heracles who is such a figure of fun in Aristophanes' *Birds* than of the tragic Sophoclean hero whose last words are:

*Come then, my unyielding soul, do not wait  
to awaken the fearful demon again.  
Put a curb of steel, stone-set, on my lips.  
No cries of ill omen! The struggle ahead  
will be hard, but the end will be joyful.*

### Pompous Jupiter

Sophocles ends there, but not Ovid. His grand climax is the metamorphosis of Hercules on the pyre, when his mortal nature is sloughed off like a snake-skin and he is swept by Jupiter to a new home in the skies. But his admission to Olympus has to be secured first by a speech from Jupiter addressed to the immortals in language of a most naughtily entertaining pomposity, which undermines any of the tragic effect that Ovid might have carried over from *The Women of Trachis*. To allay the gods' fear for Hercules as he burns on the pyre, he makes Jupiter say:

*'You gods, this anxiety of yours is a pleasure  
to me. I offer myself wholehearted congratulations  
that I should be called the father and king of a people  
that cares,  
that a son of mine should be also supported by your  
good wishes.  
This support is a tribute, I'm sure, to his own  
magnificent exploits,  
but I am myself in your debt. Now truly, my faithful  
subjects,  
you mustn't be needlessly frightened. Ignore those  
flames on Mount Oeta.  
The hero who conquered all will conquer the fire you  
are watching.  
Vulcan's power will only affect the part he derives  
from his mother's side. The part he derives from me is  
eternal,  
it cannot be touched by death and is fully resistant to  
fire.  
This part, when its time on earth is complete, will be  
welcomed by me  
to the realms of the sky, and I trust this action of mine  
will give pleasure  
to all the gods. But if any among you by chance is  
against  
the admission of Hercules here as a god, you may  
grudge the reward,  
but will know it was richly deserved and grant your  
reluctant approval.'*

### Pompous Augustus?

A coda to this little comparison. Ovid may not only have been cheeky where his literary sources were concerned. His comic presentation of Jupiter as a pompous president of the immortals, and elsewhere as a wily seducer of mortal women, is somewhat at odds with his virtual equation of Jupiter with the emperor Augustus at the end of his long poem:

*Where Jupiter governs the heavens, the earth is under  
Augustus  
and each is ruler and father. (Met.15. 859–60)*

This could be conventional lip-service to the imperial regime, but it could also be outrageously tongue-in-cheek. However we interpret it, the *Metamorphoses* can hardly have been helpful, as Virgil's *Aeneid* would have been, in boosting the emperor's aim to revive the old moral values of the Roman republic together with respect for religion and the gods.

In A.D. 8, shortly after the *Metamorphoses* was finished, Ovid was sent by Augustus into exile. Despite the pleas of himself and his friends, he was never allowed back to Rome. The reasons for

this devastating blow have never been fully established; but Ovid's presentation of Jupiter in the *Metamorphoses* might have had something to do with it. We may recall too that in Ovid's time there was a regular cult of Hercules at Rome, and poets often spoke of Augustus as another Hercules – who does not emerge too well either from the river-crossing incident that Ovid derived from Sophocles.

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